

How the Bible fits together: Covenant (Part 1)

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[0 : 0 0] Well, a few weeks ago, in fact, probably a few months ago, in our evening services, we began a study. Now, don't worry if you haven't been at this study, I'll explain how it all works. It's basically asking the question, how does the whole Bible fit together? And in order to understand that, we basically did something very simple. We read the first two chapters of the Bible, Genesis one and two, and the last two chapters of the Bible, Genesis Revelation 21 and 22. And we observed that there are many of the same themes repeated in both of these chapters. So in other words, if you go to the beginning of the Bible, and if you go to the end of the Bible, you will find the same things. And not only that, these things that are emphasized at the start and that are emphasized at the end also run right through the whole Bible. Even though the Bible was written over many, many hundreds of years, and even though there are many different authors, and even though it's 66 books from Genesis to Revelation, it is one perfect unity. It is one amazing message. And that diagram there, if you can see it, lists six themes that run through the Bible. You've got land, family, temple, law, kingdom, and covenant. And so if you go through them, if you read at the start of the Bible, if you read at the end of the Bible, you'll find these things. So for example, we'll take land. I won't go through them all, but just to give you the idea of how it works, you take the idea of land, you go to the beginning of the Bible, and you find the Garden of Eden, a land that God has made. And then you run through the

Bible and you see that so many of God's promises are based around this concept of land. You see it happening with Noah, you see it happening with Abraham, you see it happening with the children of Israel coming out of Egypt into the Promised Land. You then see the New Testament where everything starts off in that Promised Land and then spreads out from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to all the ends of the earth. So eventually you get to Revelation, where the last description we have in chapters 21 and 22 is of the New Heavens and the New Earth, which again is a land, God's place for his people. And the same things apply with family, it's a theme that runs right through the Bible, temple, law, all of these things. It's just amazing how the Bible fits together. So we've been looking at these over the last number of evening services and today we are reaching the end of our study and we're going to look at the final theme, the theme of covenant. And we're actually going to look at that this morning and this evening because in many ways it's like a big overall theme that sums up it all and we'll have a look both this morning and this evening as to how this idea of covenant means, runs right through the whole of the Bible. So let's read again from Gen. 1 of 321. Behold the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with the fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of

Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord, for this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord. I will put my law within them and I will write it on their parts and I will be their God and they shall be my people and no longer shall each one teach his neighbour and each his brother saying, know the Lord, for they shall all know me from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord, for I will forgive their iniquity and I will remember their sin no more. Now in order to look at these themes we've basically asked three very simple questions. What happened in the Old Testament? What happened in the New Testament and what does this mean for us? And this morning we'll be mostly probably virtually all just on the first question, what happened in the Old Testament? But before we become to that we have to ask ourselves, what do we mean when we say covenant? Covenant is one of the most important and one of the most amazing things you will find in the Bible.

What does it mean? What are we talking about? Well it's a very big topic but we can actually describe it in fairly simple terms. Put very simply a covenant is a relationship of the utmost commitment. It's a relationship of the absolute deepest, deepest commitment.

And there are four basic elements to it. First of all a covenant is a relationship or what we could call a bond. It's where two people are brought together in a connection and that is to be a matter of total commitment. It's a matter of life and death. It's not half-hearted, it's not casual, it is just the deepest, deepest relationship, a bond. Secondly there are terms within that relationship. In other words there are things that are acceptable and there are things that are unacceptable and these are to be consistently maintained. Thirdly there are blessings from this relationship and fourthly there are curses associated with this relationship as well. Now to make that clear it is probably best to think of an example and one of the best examples of a covenant is marriage. Marriage is intended to be a relationship of the utmost commitment, a bond that is a matter of life and death. Now that is why marriage is so precious and so beautiful because it is the deepest, deepest commitment. But there are terms involved in that relationship aren't there? You don't get married to somebody and then do whatever you like. There are certain things that are acceptable and certain things that are unacceptable and I don't need to say what they are, you know exactly what I mean. And as a result there are blessings associated with marriage. My poor wife probably wonders what they are but there are blessings associated with marriage and we know that that is true. It's a wonderful, wonderful gift. But if we neglect the terms of marriage, if we break the terms of marriage then if you like there are problems that you could call it a curse because if a husband mistreats his wife and abuses her that that's not a blessing that's a curse for the wife. And so these four elements of relationship, terms, blessing, curses, that's at the heart of marriage and that's a good example of what a covenant means. But when it comes to the Bible and when it comes to God's covenant there's one crucial difference because in a marriage when two parties come together they come together as equals. But with God it's different because with God in the covenant bond there is what we call a superior and inferior relationship. God is superior and we are inferior. Now that's not to make us think that God is kind of like a bully or that he's been harsh or unfair but it's actually to tell us that we have no right whatsoever to be in a relationship with God. But yet he condescends, he comes down and graciously wants to be in a relationship with us. And so that's what a covenant means. Very basically put a really deep strong relationship and it's really really important that we understand this because God likes covenant and God deals with us in terms of covenant. And there's two key words that I want you to associate with this word covenant. When you hear the word covenant you should be thinking of consistency and commitment and I'll probably say that many many times today. Consistency and commitment are at the heart of covenant. God is consistent with his covenant terms. In other words when he makes a promise he keeps it. Now it's worth just stopping there because my entire life of having any other understanding of politics

[9 : 21] or the way the Western world works seems to be that a promise can be made and forgotten at the drop of a hat. And it's one of the most frustrating things that we ever face.

God is not like that. If he makes a promise he keeps it. And he sets out standards, standards of conduct, standards of morality, standards of what is right and wrong and he sticks to that. God doesn't say one day stealing is wrong and then the next day oh actually stealing is fine. God has standards and he maintains them. When God gives a warning he means it.

Now sometimes you can see this with parents. A child will start misbehaving and their parents give them a warning and the child completely ignores it because they know that the parent doesn't really mean it. But when God gives a warning he absolutely means it. And that's a really really important thing to remember. But on the other side of that when God promises you a blessing he delivers. He never fails to keep his promises. And when you think about it God likes covenant because it reflects his nature. God is who he is. God never changes.

God is absolutely consistent. That's why he deals with us in these consistent, clear, covenantal terms. It's what he is. That's why his name is I am. He is who he is and he's totally consistent with that. So there's this consistency which is wonderful. But there is also commitment. When God enters into a covenant relationship he is totally committed.

And that's why a covenant is more than just an agreement. It is what theologians often call a bond in blood. It is of life and death importance. It is something that God is totally, totally committed. God is never half-hearted, never casual, never changeable. He is totally, totally committed. Know therefore that the Lord your God is God. The faithful God who keeps covenant. And at the heart of that covenant relationship is this phrase and I want you to remember that it's really important. I will be your God and you shall be my people.

[12 : 13] That's what God wants. God wants to be your God. He wants to be God for you. He wants to be God to you. And he wants you to be his people. He wants you to be his. Now even that alone is amazing. God wants you to be his. So covenant relationship, consistency, commitment, I will be your God. You shall be my people. That's how God wants things to be. And so if we ask the question what happened in the Old Testament and we go back to the start at the Garden of Eden we see that that's how things were. God's connection with Adam was one of covenant relationship. God and humanity have this relationship, this intimate bond where God is their God and they are his creation, they are his people. And there are terms within that relationship. Positively, Adam is told to fill the earth, to be fruitful, to have dominion, to work, to keep the ground. Adam is given all these terms that he is fulfilled in a positive sense and also there's a negative prohibition and I'm sure you know what it is. Do not eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. So there's terms very clearly. There were blessings and Adam and Eve had amazing blessings. They lived in a beautiful land where there was abundant provision. They were a family in perfect fellowship with one another. God was with them as they lived in Eden as a temple garden in his presence.

They had God's law whereby he had told them what they should do, what they shouldn't do and they were part of God's kingdom and God had even delegated rule to them as his vice regent. And so there was these amazing blessings for Adam but they were also curses warned.

The Lord God commanded the man saying you may surely eat of every tree in the garden but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat for in that day you eat of it you shall surely die. So here we have the very beginning of creation, the very beginning of history. God wants to be in this relationship with humanity. God provides land, family, law, temple, kingdom, everything that we could want. I mean just, I mean you look today, look out today, that's a glimpse of Eden. The splendor of creation, Adam had everything and that was what God wanted to give him. He wanted to give him everything. He wanted life to be brilliant for Adam. That's what he wanted. But he said but with privilege comes responsibility and I am asking you and instructing you do not eat of the fruit of this tree. But of course that's exactly what Adam did and in doing so he broke the covenant relationship and as Hosea 6.7 tells us Adam transgressed the covenant and so that's the key moment at the start of the Bible because the rest of the Bible is telling us what God has done in response to Adam's broken covenant. Now this is really, really interesting. You think about everything that Adam had, everything that he had and all he had to do was not break that one commandment and yet that's exactly what he did and despite the warnings, despite the blessings, despite the goodness of God, Adam threw that back in God's face and basically said no, I'll do what I think is best. And so you think how should God respond to that?

You think God would just say fine, I'm walking away but God does not walk away from his covenant and that is what we have right through the rest of the Bible. The fact that God has not abandoned us. And so if you go on through the Old Testament and read it you will see that this theme of covenant comes up again and again and again. God's response to humanity's broken covenant is not to forget about us. God's response is to re-establish a covenant relationship with his people. Now in the Old Testament there are four great covenant moments, four big moments in terms of the covenant and they're associated with four key people,

Noah, Abraham, Moses and David. These are four, the four key covenant moments in the Old Testament because God comes and makes a covenant with each of these four people.

[17 : 46] First of all, Noah, behold I establish my covenant with you and with your offspring after you and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark for it is every beast of the earth. I establish my covenant with you that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth. So when you hear the word Noah you always think flood, don't you? Well that's of course accurate but really when you hear the word Noah you should think covenant because this is a key covenant moment. So that's number one. Next one, Abraham. Then Abraham fell on his face and God said to him, behold my covenant is with you. You shall be the father of a multitude of nations. Again when you hear the name Abraham think covenant. The next one is Moses and I'll read two passages here. Exodus 34, 27. The Lord said to Moses write these words for in accordance with these words I've made a covenant with you and with Israel. So he was there with the Lord 40 days and 40 nights in either eight bread nor drank water and he wrote the tablets on the tablets the words of the covenant, the 10 commandments. Then

Leviticus 26, 9. I will turn to you and make you fruitful and multiply you and will confirm my covenant with you. You shall eat old store long kept and you shall clear out the old to make way for the new. I will make my dwelling among you and my soul shall not abhor you and I will walk among you and will be your God and you shall be my people. Again Moses covenant.

The fourth one, the final big covenant moment is with David. I will sing of the steadfast love of the Lord forever with my mouth. I will make known your faithfulness to all generations.

But I said steadfast love will be built up forever in the heavens. You will establish your faithfulness. You have said I have made a covenant with my chosen one. I have sworn to David my servant. I will establish your offspring forever and build your throne for all generations. And now the key chapter in terms of the Davidic covenant as we call it is 2 Samuel chapter 7. Now all of these things when you hear the names Noah, Abraham, Moses, David always think covenant because God is making a covenant with these people and all of these covenants involve the utmost commitment. They are a matter of life and death. Now I want you to notice something that I think is really amazing. Remember we are looking at how the whole Bible fits together. And remember we said that there are themes running through the Bible. You've got the theme of the land running through the Bible, the theme of family running through the Bible, the theme of temple running through the Bible, the theme of law running through the Bible, the theme of kingdom running through the Bible.

These themes run through the Bible. Now let's look at these verses again. Covenant with Noah was all about the land. It was all about the earth. I'll make my covenant with every living creature, every beast of the earth, there'll never be a flood to destroy the earth.

[21 : 18] So that's land language. Covenant with Noah all about the land. Okay, go to the covenant of Abraham. Now the land was still part of it but the primary emphasis now is on family.

I will make you a father of a multitude of nations. You then come to Moses and again the family and the land are still important to it but now we see with Moses there's the addition of the law in terms of the covenant. And also the passage from Leviticus, there's the theme of the temple. That phrase, I will make my dwelling among you, that's temple language. God present with his people. And then when we come to David, I'm sure you can guess what I'm going to say because the key emphasis of the Levitic covenant is kingdom.

God is making his covenant with David to establish his throne to all generations. And so let's sum this up. Noah, it's the land. Abraham, it's the family. Moses, it's the law and the temple. David, it's the kingdom. And if we go back to our diagram, you can see it all fits together perfectly under this theme of covenant. In God's covenant dealings with the people in the Old Testament, he is making a plan for his land, a plan for his family, a plan for his temple, a plan for his law and a plan for his kingdom. And in all of these things we see, I hope that the Bible fits together perfectly. And in all of these things, we see God's plan being worked out. And in all of these things, as we'll see later on, we are being pointed towards Jesus Christ. So in the Old Testament, this theme of covenant comes up again and again and again. God deals with his people in terms of covenant. However, the Old Testament is not primarily an account of covenant obedience. It's an account of covenant disobedience. It's a record of covenant failure. And when God came to rebuke his people, he does so in covenant terms. I'll read some verses, 2 Kings 17 verse 35 and verse 40, the Lord made a covenant with them and commanded them, you shall not fear other gods or bow yourselves down to them or sacrifice or serve them or sacrifice to them. However, they would not listen. Same chapter verse 15, they despised his statutes and his covenant that he made with their fathers and the warnings that he gave them. So God had this covenant relationship and the people kept on turning away. That's why very often, Israel is described as an unfaithful wife because it's like it's again using the imagery of marriage. They're breaking the terms of the bond. They're abandoning God. And this theme is what lay at the heart of the role of the Old Testament prophets. The prophets were covenant spokesmen. They were communicating what God as covenant King wanted. And they also sent warnings to the people.

Yet the Lord warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer saying, turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes in accordance with the law that I commanded your father that I sent you by my servants, the prophets. The prophets were warning, were covenant warning men. It's a bit like if you imagine, imagine the test going to Stornoway was struggling and the head office, whatever it is in England, were looking at the figures and they saw the test going Stornoway was was struggling and they were like, right, we're going to send somebody to warn test go in Stornoway that they need to improve their sales if they're going to survive. They sent someone to warn them, to tell them if you don't do something, there's going to be trouble. And that's exactly what the prophets did. They were warning the people and they were saying, if you keep turning away from God, you will face a curse. You will get into serious trouble. But the people would not listen. And the vital point I want to emphasize, remember what I said that being in a covenant means being consistent. So when God judged Israel in the Old Testament, he was not being unfair. He was being consistent because he had warned them again and again and again and God has to be consistent. You've got to ask yourself, have you ever been warned by God? Has God ever warned you through his word about what will happen if you are short sighted and push him away? God is consistent with his blessings and with his warnings.

And the covenant promise and the covenant warnings lie at the heart of the Old Testament. Do you know what the very last word of the Old Testament is? Do you want to turn in your Bible? The very last word of the Old Testament, in the ESV it says, Decree of utter destruction.

[27 : 35] Now that's a very good translation because it's very literal. But the authorized version and the NIV are probably easier to understand because they use the word, curse. The last word in the Old Testament is curse. And the key point is that that is covenant language.

God is saying that throughout this Old Testament it's not been a happy ending. It has been a sad ending because the people have constantly turned away from me and if they keep doing it they will face a curse. And I don't need to tell you that the same is through today.

God is warning us that if we forget about him, we too will face a curse. So for that reason God is consistent. But God is also committed. Now remember these two key words, consistency and commitment. Now the prophets knew that God was consistent and that's why they warned the people. But the prophets also knew that God is committed. They knew the foundational truth that God never ever gives up on his covenant. And so at the end of the Old Testament God's message is not, I will never have a covenant again with my people.

God's message is that I will make a new covenant. I will make a better covenant. Now that's exactly what we read in Jeremiah. Remember what I said? Jeremiah was at the low point when the people had lost the land because of their covenant failure. The family had fallen apart because of the covenant failure. The temple had been destroyed because of the covenant failure. The law had been abandoned in their covenant failure and the kingdom had been conquered because of their covenant failure. Everything in terms of the covenant was at rock bottom. In the days of Jeremiah and Jeremiah comes with this message from God which says, behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. And that is because God does not give up. And in fact, this was God's plan all along that there would be a new covenant or as we tend to call it, a new testament. Because that's exactly what the New Testament is.

It is the new covenant. And that's why the New Testament is all about the work of the covenant mediator, Jesus Christ. And I really hope you'll come back tonight because we will look in more detail at how Jesus performs that work and how he has come to establish that new covenant. But I just want to close by saying something that is incredibly important.

[31 : 32] This whole theme of covenant tells us many amazing things about God. It tells us that God is true. It tells us that God is consistent. It tells us that God is fair. And how we wish we had a government, we have a good government in so many ways. But yet I know that, well, if you have anything like me, we get disillusioned because people seem inconsistent. People seem unfair. And you look at the world around us, people are unfair. People are inconsistent.

And maybe you've been on the receiving end of that. Maybe people have been inconsistent with you. Maybe you know these people who one day are your best friend and then the next day they blank you. And you think, what have I done? Sometimes you feel that people give up on you. Maybe you've had difficulties and you've had struggles and you've made mistakes and maybe you've lost friends on the way because people have given up on you. And that can be incredibly, incredibly hard. But this concept of covenant tells us that God is consistent.

And it tells us that God is committed. And that means that right now I can say to you, God has not given up on you. God has not given up on you. Now that's a really important thing because it's so easy to think, I had my chance when I was younger. I heard the Gospel when I was younger and I felt God working in my life and I didn't do it. I didn't put my faith in Christ. I pushed it away. Had I been younger, when I was younger, I had the chance I've lost it. And it's so easy to think I've made too many mistakes in my life. I've done things that nobody else knows about that mean that I am absolutely nowhere near good enough for

God. I've failed God. I've let him down. My chance has gone. Now people think like that and maybe you think like that. And let me tell you today, God has not given up on you. Because God never gives up on his covenant. Ever. So God hasn't given up on you. And he never will as long as there is breath in your lungs and as long as there is blood in your veins, God will never ever give up on you. And today he is holding out his hand to you again and he is saying, I will be everything that you need. And I will love you forever. And I will protect you. And I will forgive you. And I will heal you. And I will look after you.

And I will never ever ever let you down. And don't ever ever ever think that if you become a Christian that you'll muck it up next week because it's not about you, it's about God.

[35 : 04] And at one level we all muck it up. And I muck it up probably more than anybody else in my Christian life. But God doesn't give up on me. And he will never give up on you. And so please, please put your trust in him. And say, yes, Lord, you will be my God. And I will be among your people. That's what God wants for you today. And believe me, if you want to be a Christian, God wants you to be a million times more. And so just go for it because God has not given up. Amen. Let us pray.